

# The liberating theology of a planet's beneficence: a possibility

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**Keywords:** Creation; idolatry; anthropocene; love; liberation theology; eco-theology; reverence.

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**Abstract.** *Current climate crises could be considered an end of times as we have known them, requiring the human species as stewards of Creation, to make revolutionary changes to how the planet has been mis treated. Are we – the people of the twenty-first century Anthropocene age – also capable of a “Copernican revolution [evident] in Paul’s thinking” (Witherington 2005, p.*

40) to see the planet as sacred and through Christ's wisdom as part of divine Creation? Do the peoples of the world have the capacity to re-store the planet through this reverential prism? Or – disassociated from our source – are we set at rapid speed to a catastrophic end, driven by neo-liberal greed and post-modern “idolatry” (Inc. 11: 61 in Behr), dressed up as the necessary economics of late capitalism? It seems that the worries of Athanasius (On the Incarnation) in the early Christian Church (4<sup>th</sup> C) are as relevant today as they were then, even if the context differed.

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## 1. (R)evolutionary thinking

*Oh Lord how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
The earth is full of your creatures  
(Psalm 104: 24)<sup>1</sup>*

The Pauline corpus illuminates the centrality of Christ in the Gospels by considering how:

(1) Paul's storied world is reshaped around the Christ event, and (2) How Paul's hermeneutic at handling the Old Testament, Mosaic Law, God, eschatology, Adam, and a plethora of other subjects, changed once he began to look at these topics through the eyes of Christ (Witherington 2005, p. 28).

Paul not only reconsidered life and faith through the Christ event. His Copernican revolution was set against a backdrop of harsh physical conditions and geo-political tensions, in which, as Witherington suggests in 2 Thessalonians, “he and his converts believed they were living in the end of times” (2006, p. 236), lending an eschatological tone to his experience of the Christ event and its promised salvation. Yet Paul was also aware of the ongoing role of nature as Creation: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves...” (Romans 8, 22-23). Current climate crises could be considered both an “end of times” as we have

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<sup>1</sup> All Biblical references come from the New Revised Standard Version 1989 Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

known them, and a “difficult birth” towards a new ecological consciousness. Such labour pains require the human species as stewards of Creation, to make revolutionary changes as to how we have mis treated the earth, and not fully gestated our consciousness towards its miraculousness. Are we – the people of the twenty-first century Anthropocene age – (both diverse in spiritual beliefs and endeavours as well as spirit-less) also capable of a “Copernican revolution [evident] in Paul’s thinking” (Witherington 2005, p. 40); to see the planet as sacred and through Christ’s wisdom as part of divine Creation? Do the peoples of the world have the capacity to re-store the planet through this reverential prism? Or – disassociated from our source – are we set at rapid speed to a catastrophic end, driven by neo-liberal greed and post-modern idolatry dressed up as the necessary economics of late capitalism? Through an intentional and indeed necessary inter disciplinary lens, this paper examines post-modern idolatry in the context of the climate change epoch in which we find ourselves against the reverential instructions of both the First and New Testaments, and subsequent critique of those instructions.

The Anthropocene Epoch is characterized by the human impact on the environment and awareness of that impact. According to Hawke and Palsson (2017), Ingold and Palsson (2013), and Steffen *et al.*, (2007), the Anthropocene, and its great technological and industrial acceleration, began post WWII and heralds the greatest degradation of the planet in living history. Steffen *et al.* (2007, p. 618) say: “To develop a universally accepted strategy to ensure the sustainability of Earth’s life support system against human- induced stresses is one of the greatest research and policy challenges ever to confront humanity”. It also constitutes a moral responsibility to recognise the full providence of Creation. The future, if there is one as we understand it, will rely on mitigation strategies along with intelligent partnership with the natural body of the planet, as “a part of nature” rather than being “*apart* from nature” (Hawke 2022). In his letters to the Romans Paul said “Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you”, (Romans 15, 7); we too are re-called to welcome the God-given earth and embrace rather than exclude (Volf 1997) this life that we have exoticized and turned into “Other”, and receive the knowledge offered, by sharing rather than over-exploiting its gifts. We can take some of our cues from the prophet Joel, who affirmed that God’s graciousness is applied to the whole of Creation: “Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the

wilderness are green, the tree bears its fruit, the fig and the vine give their full yield” (Joel 2, 22).<sup>2</sup>

This paper foregrounds the challenges and contributions posed specifically by eco-theology as liberation praxis, and our co-evolved relationship with life, that is – nature, culture and spirit. It may therefore be more appropriate to apprehend this work as Liberation Spirituality rather than through the more accepted Liberation Theology. In any case, Liberation Theologians such as Moltmann (1994); Sobrino (2008); Goizueta (2008), and Karkkainen (2003), inform a more inclusive and gracious understanding of how a planet revived and revered, may continue to serve not only humans but all of Creation, through the beneficence of a living and breathing theo-spirituality. Eco-theology through a Liberation Theology optic further de-centres the human, and emphasises an embrace of the natural world as an equal partner in a web of relations, over whom we are instructed by God to guardian not dominate, this “carefully ordered creation” (Bauckham 2012, p. 5). This brings the dialectic of “stewardship or domination” (Rose 1992, p. 26) into acute focus.

Questions are posed throughout this article to discover whether current humanity can co-exist with its same and different selves, and the ecology that sustains it, and enact the “Copernican revolution of thinking”, evident in Paul’s thinking, and the broader understanding of Liberation Theology. This liberation movement came into being through the abject disavowal by oppressive colonial and political regimes towards whole peoples who were considered exploitable because of difference in race, ethnicity and beliefs, and who had a bounty of natural resources and land, that as history has narrated was turned over to cash cropping. Imperialist oppression and ecological destruction are co-implicated, as history as narrated; when war is waged on a people, the environment also suffers, repeating the “impiety and lawlessness” (*Inc.* 11, in Behr 2014, p. 61) that so troubled Athanasius. Although he was troubled for different reasons, it is not unreasonable to suggest that our common ecological disasters are born of earlier and more widespread lawlessness, and echo the warning in Deuteronomy, that curses will prevail if the commandments are not adhered to, for example: “Cursed will be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the fruit of

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout Christianity’s emergence we have seen several moments of sublime praise for nature as God’s creation, for example Hildegard of Bingen’s veneration of nature in her *Book of Divine Works* (1987) and St Francis of Assis’s *The Canticle of the Creatures* that equally and inclusively honours ‘brother son, ... sister moon and stars, and wind’. See also Barbiero (2016).

your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock” (Deut 28, 17-18). The very motivation of development from the military-industrial complex being profit based, with little regard for what physical environments can produce, or indeed what is considered “natural law” in spiritual and cultural communities differently expressed, further ignores God’s original blessing of nature and people rightly, treated. Yet the tension between the expansion and evangelisation of Christianity through colonialism (and the associated environmental and cultural destruction) from which by necessity ecumenical Liberation Theology was eventually spawned, remains complex and unforclosed. Not to mention that true evangelization is as much about renewal and liberation of the soul, as it is about ethical and political practices that get in the way of such a realization, as discussed below.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Liberation and oppression

Assassinated Archbishop Romero from El Salvador, detailing the plight of his suffering people under the totalitarian regime of the time, said, “People in the way get killed” (Sobrino 2008, p. 85); which included himself in 1980. He supported the people through human rights abuses that are only now finding justice, and provided a voice from liberation theology that has followed, in all areas of the world so troubled. So too it seems that nature is in the way of progress – natural and indigenous species of flora and fauna, overworked and poisoned to be replaced by more cashable produce.<sup>4</sup> Forcing people to change from traditional subsistence lifestyles into cash cropping has exponentially marginalised those in the developing world (most especially women), while simultaneously polluting and destroying their natural resources, some of which are deemed ontologically sacrosanct. Equally concerning in the developed world, is an enthusiastic and at times obsessive push towards economic growth and mono-cultures, irrespective of the reserves nature has to provide us with. We are now urgently called to a radical re-thinking of ecologically sustainable process, an “ecodemocracy” (Kopnina *et al.* 2021) of sorts, and a tectonic shift in thinking and believing in what we think and believe, and how well we share or do not share our best thinking with the world.

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<sup>3</sup> See the *Evangelii Nuntiandi* from Pope Paul VI (1975) for a larger discussion on this.

<sup>4</sup> All that Sobrino, Romero and other Liberation Theologians teach, can be transposed on to how nature, women, the working and under-class and Indigenous First Nations People are treated under oppressive regimes. See Batstone *et al.* (1997) for deft and extensive elaboration of these ideas.

A more recent example of enforced shift from subsistence and original faith, and from one way of life into numerous others (not just one other) is narrated poetically, by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner in *Iep Jaltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter* (2017) regarding the dispossession of the Marshall Islands people due to rampant nuclear testing by America in the 40s and 50s in the Pacific Ocean. Apart from having their own religious traditions, the Islanders – whose dwelling place is spread out among the shallow atolls of the Pacific – were converted by earlier waves of colonialism and its embedded Christianity, including from Portugal, Spain, Germany, Japan and eventually America. These influences eroded some specific cultural and traditional lifestyle and beliefs. Yet despite the machinations of colonial imbued Christianity impacting their traditions, the people of the Marshall Islands have adapted to a bicultural sense of faith, in which their love and guardianship of their land and waters is made clear despite the environmental challenges they now face.

The de-naturing of their traditional life was further compounded by their forced removal to other islands because the Marshall Islands archipelago had become too radioactive to be hospitable. “Having inherited the fallout of nuclear testing (as cancers and environmental death), having been dispatched to a safer island home, having buried elders and young relatives, Jetñil-Kijiner draws the reader on to the next catastrophe, climate change” (Hawke 2017, p. 83). In her poem “Two Degrees”, she prophesies that climate change and oceanic rise in temperature and level, will wash the “crumbs of the pacific off the table” (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, pp. 74-76), constituting the next wave of extreme change, in which Marshallese will increasingly become climate change refugees. The greater world would be wise to heed this abject warning of peril.

A similar history of disavowal of religious and spiritual traditions, people and nature appears with the story of Nuclear Testing in Maralinga, Australia at the same time. Australia, and its already colonized and Christianized Indigenous people, suffered firstly from the initial impacts of colonization (disease and massacre), and later by the forced removal of their children by white governmental policy. Further, because Indigenous Australians did not consider the land something to be owned but more over something to be protected by human guardians, the way was left open to colonial interpretation that Australia now belonged to the British Crown<sup>5</sup>. The British carried out their nuclear testing

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<sup>5</sup> See for example: “The Apology” from Prime Minister Kevin Rudd February 13, 2008, to those Australians for further elaboration of Australian colonial policy and its changes over time. As postcolonial scholars widely note, colonialism and environmental

in this remote place Maralinga from 1956-1963, in the Woomera, South Australia, home to remote Indigenous people from the Anangu Pitjantjara and Yankunytjatjara clans and their spirituality. These communities now also suffered from nuclear fall-out, and their 60,000-year-old belief systems were virtually expunged in the process. Reparative justice with those communities was slow to evolve, as once again oppression of the “Other” proliferated. The travesties of these examples and the “othering” imbued in them, while exotic in a European landscape, are easily transferable to the degradation of the earth and minority groups in Europe. One only has to count the number of refugee deaths from ill-fated crossings of the Mediterranean Sea, to recognize the parallel dilemmas of people fleeing war, oppression, strife, environmental damage and famine in their home countries. The case of the Lampedusa refugee haven off the coast of Italy will yield its own stories in time.

In 2019-2022 as planet Earth and its peoples braced itself against the outbreak of COVID-19, many asked if this might be the crisis to finally embrace the whole world and all its peoples and not exclude the marginal, but rather embrace all life, and welcome newness over the threshold. Towards the end of the twentieth century, Volf questioned the possibility of dissolving “exclusionary polarities” (1996: 99) that might better respect cultural and spiritual traditions that differ from dominant perceptions primarily from the West. Twenty years later the jury is still out on this. The question remains open: “can we manage full *in-corp-oration* of Others and of nature” (Hawke 2018, p. 195) or are we so hard-wired that even global tragedy cannot shift us towards ecological and cultural sustainability and integration? The recent invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Putin regime, suggests we are still challenged by inclusivity and embrace, investing instead in fear of the “other” inherited perhaps from former conflicts.

Solidarity with the poor, sick, marginalised and overthrown, must, by necessity then, extend to a solidarity with the poor and denatured state of the planet's ecology. This calls for the assembly of “a fresh sustainability logic [in which reverence is embedded] ... that cultivates connectivity, and adaptive capacity” (Hawke and Palsson 2017, p. 235) between the biosocial constituents, and their spiritual/traditional/religious agency. “Biosociality” (Palsson 2013), gestures towards the engagement between biological and socially diverse worlds, rather than operating out of Cartesian dualisms that render culture more valuable than nature. This dangerous Cartesian optic (that earnestly guards the threshold of opposites), whether it pertains to the nature/culture divide or a

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degradation have always gone hand in hand. See for example: Potter (2019) in the Australian context and Boff (1995) for a more global analysis.

geopolitical/theological divide, makes a communion of entanglement problematic and a potent life-giving spectrum of relationality unrealizable, because, “The welcome over the threshold or a membrane to a new life and habitat is less likely, not only because of physical conditions but because of the psycho-social and geo-political conditions that govern host/age and welcome” (Hawke 2018: 198). How might we host nature more inclusively and respectfully and embrace a “collective eco-literacy” (Freire 2004, p. 18)? To this end it could be argued that, “Liberation theologies are the manifestation not only of a [positive] postmodern condition but also the praxis of a new “theological paradigm” (Batstone *et al* 1997, p. 260), in which ecology pleads for an equal voice.

For holistic restoration and reconciliation between the earth and its peoples to become possible, and for the mission of Jesus to be fully expressed, “From creation-in-the-beginning to continuous creation ... [meaning] God sustains what he has created” (Moltmann 1997, p. 97), the Old Testament once again proves instructive. God “watches over the world once he has created it, in order to preserve it from the chaos by which it is unremittingly threatened” (97), chaos unleashed by humans, which in self-reflection may help us re-consider our rank in Creation. After all we humans were only created on the 6<sup>th</sup> day along with a vast array of other creatures arguably made from dust (Genesis 2). Yet we are clearly directed to understand the specific patterning decreed by God, a cosmic patterning in which humanity is merely one actor in a vast production: “And God said, ... Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind” (Genesis 1, 24) ... Then God said, “Let us make humankind (Genesis 1, 26) ... then there was evening and there was morning, sixth day” (Genesis 31).

### 3. Re-visiting the Old to restore the New

*You save humans and animals alike, O Lord.  
(Psalm 36:6)*

The challenge for our climate changing times appears to be to restore g/local ecological respect, awe and wonder, and the grace of God’s gifts to us in the generations that preceded the life of Jesus Christ, but which deeply informed his mission, and our current apprehension of the same. Understanding the genealogical development of Judaism intertwined with the agrarian culture of the Middle East, perhaps enables a learning from the past to envision a future, truer to God’s intention. The notion of a sacred commons and the confluence of all



life on earth comes into play as the historico-theological cartography of God's mission is unfurled and better understood.

This web of interconnection is set up clearly in Genesis, as Bauckham explains, "The fundamental relationship between humans and other creatures is [precisely] their common creatureliness. In Genesis 2, 7 God forms the first humans from the earth, just as he does all living creatures, flora and fauna" (2012, p. 4). Theocentric creation<sup>6</sup> is predicated on the notion that "The human dominion is not granted so that humans may violate that order and remake creation to their own design" (Bauckham 2012, p. 6). On the contrary, it is patterned to be ever in relation, to be biosocial or further, theo-bio-social.

In his hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of every human being (Job 12, 10).

This analysis of eco-theological perspectives locates responsibility for the planet to be in in relationship with its peoples, not as separate from the people. Along with *Genesis* the *Book of Psalms* (in which humans and nature praise God and Creation), *Deuteronomy*, and *Job* from the Old Testament, are equally instructive. Some New Testament excerpts from Matthew (5, 5; 10, 29-31), and Luke (12, 6-7) are further advanced by the example of Paul's conversion as it might apply to a global conversion in favour of ecology, rather than an ongoing committal to ecocide.

For example, in Deuteronomy we are told, "If you pay heed to the Commandments which I give you this day, and love the Lord your God and serve him with all your heart and soul, then I will send rain for your land in season" (Deut 11, 13-17). Deuteronomy throws some clues as to how to care for God, each other and all that is created and sustains us. It also directs us to share the bounty with "the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphan and the widows among you" (Deut 16, 11).<sup>7</sup> Here the message is clear that equitable sharing of everything and respect for the sacrifice of animals is also to be acknowledged.

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<sup>6</sup> Bauckham (2012) points out the horizontal rather than vertical construction of the world, meaning that life was created 'alongside', rather than 'on top of'. In such a schema there is a promise of equality.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Ruth (1-4) the Moabite stranger who cared for her widowed Israelite mother-in-law Naomi and was rewarded by God for her honour. Here, I note Rev Dr Jeanette Mathews and her expertise on exilic theology and its relationship to environmental and other concerns. See her paper: Mathews (2019).

Bauckham (2012, 65) interrogates in depth, the lengths that the Israelite's went to, to ensure proper care and distribution. He details those parts of the law that mitigate against poor animal husbandry, animal suffering (*tzaar baalei hayim*) and hunting that is needless. Further, and drawing on Leviticus, there are laws centring on the actual treatment of the land, and the requirement to leave fields fallow every seventh year, "to rest the earth" (84). "Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD" (Leviticus 25, 3-4). This sabbatical year not unlike the Sabbath day, instructs humans and their labour also to rest. Jewish people are also instructed to take a sabbatical year to study the First Testament and to otherwise rest from their labours. Both Bauckham (2012) and Rose (1992) point to the significance of "resting" the earth especially in recent and current times. There is wisdom in the intention to engage in a year of reflection, to regain consciousness of the power of creation – and the God that created it.

Jewish festivals often invoke respect for nature, such as "Pesach, Shavuot, Succoth ... and the festival of trees" (Bauckham 2012, 85). Similar injunctions and decrees from the Old Testament apply to water, "a vital reality, but like trees, also referred to in allegorical terms – *mayim chayim*, living waters ... beginning with the very first Psalm" (Bauckham 2012, 86):<sup>8</sup>

They are like trees,  
planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit  
in its season,  
and their lives do not wither.  
In all they do,  
they prosper. (Psalm 1, 3)

When Jesus began to teach through the art of the parable, the wisdom of the past was augmented in the everyday agrarian world of the New Testament; in the very Galilean-ness of the communities he was preaching to. Drawing on Rabbinic tradition and local geography, Jesus further advanced the ecological intentions laid down in the Old Testament by wedding them to the human concerns of the time. Ironically it is those very concerns that still trouble us today, such as war, power, famine, and fear of the "other", whoever "they" may be. Yet as Paul reminds us there is possibility that we can learn from our trials, "we glory in

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<sup>8</sup> See The Chumash, the first five books of the Bible for this detail that is beyond the scope of this paper.

tribulations, knowing that tribulation waketh patience" (Romans 1, 3). Historically and in the present day, we, as a species, are implicit in creating the very situations that create peril and cause global concern, in a state of almost forgetfulness of history repeating itself. Despite the best intentions of many, humans have been waging war on each other for millennia, provoked by tensions of the times, wounding more than perceived enemies, but the very ground that supports life.

#### 4. Why Galilee

*Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth  
(Matt 5, 5)*

Bauckham (2012: 64-70) unpacks the "micro ecologies of Galilee" that spawned Judaic beliefs. I proffer that Jesus chose to preach between lower Galilee (Nazareth), the valley and (lakeside and Capernaum) and upper Galilee (Caesarea and Philippi), because of the rich influence this small but diverse environment had on his life and evolving mission. Deeper questions remain if we follow this trajectory. Was his teaching in these locations to re-enforce in the human imagination the pivotal role of nature in everything, in all life, something that was harder to do by preaching in big cities?

Perhaps, but let us take it further than that and also consider the particular reverence Jesus had for small things. "Jesus never uses the superiority of humans to animals in order to make a negative point about animals" (Bauckham 2012, p. 97), and it could be argued that for his ministry, the city and its learned men had no superiority over the humble life and lands of Galilee. As Foulcher also suggests, Jesus "embodiment of love and humility" (2015, p. 23) and his humbling from divine son to incarnate crucified man, also demonstrates this approach.

Jesus is strategic in his oration and embodiment, in which he becomes the speaking body for all bodies. He designed arguments that "depend more on the idea that, humans and animals are all creatures of God" (Bauckham 2012, p. 97) rather than further verticalizing an already hierarchical arrangement of difference in which the dialectic of servility and honorable humbling is uselessly propagated. This method serves to remind that "humans are not the priests of creation" (Bauckham 2012, p. 150), rather, they are guardians operating within a horizontal continuum.

Sustenance and recovery of Earth's actual and sacred character is an ongoing imperative in such a continuum. This is evidenced in more modern times through

the creation of organisations such as the Jewish National Fund for example, “established in 1902 ... to renew and redeem the land. It is significant ... that its Hebrew name, *Keren Kayemet*, is a quotation from the Mishnah, written 1,700 years earlier” (Rose 1992, p. 84). Everything is connected and blessings are regularly invoked, to re-iterate connection and reverence. The people of Israel, across time, plant trees in commemoration of everything as well as to visibly commit to survival and sustainability, and to “cherish biodiversity by conserving species” (Rose 1992, p. 25) according to their own patterning and God given purpose. The New Year for Trees Festival, *Tu Bi Shevat*, “on the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat, when the winter ends in Israel” (Rose 1992, p. 15), amply demonstrates this cherishing. As Rose suggests, “Blessings hallow nature, and respect the environment, the work of the Creator” (Rose 1992, p. 17). Trees are not only there anthropocentrically for humans, but for all life, as the oxygenators that they are, whether they bear actual fruit or not.

The narrative of the sparrow told in the Gospels of Luke (12, 6-7) and Matthew (10, 29-31) also demonstrates Jesus’ concern for all creatureliness, not unlike Deuteronomy’s instruction about preservation and longevity that is more ecocentrically inclined: “you shall not take the mother with the young” (Deut 22, 6-7), only take what is needed and leave the possibility for a future with what you leave behind. The lessons here are about respectful discernment in what is taken from nature to sustain human and other forms of life.<sup>9</sup>

Sparrows, for example, represent the smallest bird in the market and the message in both Luke and Matthew is clear. “Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God” (Luke 12, 6). They should be affordable for all, and no one should hunger. And indeed, the sacrificial life of the sparrow is acknowledged. The parallel point that Bauckham (2012, p. 92) makes here is that Jesus chose as his disciples, not the elevated credentialed merchants and wise men or the eagles and the hawks of the city world, but the

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<sup>9</sup> The recent example of the fish of Venetian canals is acute. During the first COVID-19 lockdown, multitudes were seen swimming freely without pollution and silt stirred from the bottom of the canals. The case of the small species of pangolins is also acutely relevant here. Rather than being cherished as their unique small selves, the species has suffered from an exotic commoditisation that not only robs it of respect and life, but has contributed to a discourse of the genetic transmission of COVID-19 through recombination. Scientists compared genome sequence data from SARS-CoV-2 and related bat and pangolin viruses and proved that the new coronavirus likely jumped from an animal host into humans (Andersen *et al.*, 2020). While it is useful to understand ‘genetic recombination’ these very understandings inadvertently demonise the smallness of bats and pangolins. Did we fail in our duty of care to small creatures?

sparrows of the world, the mostly working-class fisherman (that were the Apostles), to disseminate his salvific message.

## 5. Conclusions

*But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky,  
and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you.  
Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?  
(Job 12, 7-9)*

Fast forward to the currency of the degradation of the planet through our self-evolved climate change crisis and forgetfulness for divine instruction, as much as abject mis-management. In his exegesis on Matthew Fox, Bauckham explains: “The Paschal mystery is the Christian story of the passion, resurrection and ascension’. Fox proposes that for our age of ecological destruction, “the appropriate symbol of the Cosmic Christ who became incarnate in Jesus is that of Jesus as Mother Earth, crucified and rising daily”<sup>10</sup> (Bauckham 2012, p. 197). Does this daily crucifixion of the earth, and suffocating of the air and waters, represent our human ego-centric failure to uphold canonical laws of preservation and respect for all God’s creatures, in which the humility of the earth is overlooked? Bauckham goes some way toward answering this challenge:

This rejection of human embedded-ness in nature and of the mutual interrelations between human history and the rest of nature, in favour of an assumed interdependence of and supremacy over nature, is of course, the ideological root of the present ecological crisis (Bauckham 2012, p. 111).

For Berndtson (2010), this crisis pre-supposes a need for a “respiratory philosophy”, in which the vitalising breath is pivotal to all life as well as thinking, and inhaling the breath of life, is not a simple act of taking in air, as much as it is a conscientious inhaling of life. There is something very pneumatological in sharing the airs with other species created by God and through the embodied act of “knowing” breath. The conscious connection between thinking/knowing, breathing and doing seems holistic if not theo-ontological. As Paul also implies “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience” (Colossians 3, 12). Conscientious

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<sup>10</sup> See Bauckham’s (1988) exegesis on Mathew Fox’s *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance*, particularly Chapter 21 “Jesus Christ as Mother Earth Crucified and Resurrected” (pp. 145-149) from where this is gleaned, and Bauckham (1994).

sharing the airs of planetary life then and all elements, is arguably a humble sharing of love.

The mis-alignment of human capacity for humility and the humility of the earth, in which sharing the elements of creation is precariously situated, continues to present great challenges not just to the humble yet noble earth, but also to the Christian context as narrated by the parables of the New Testament and the Judaic ecological living world that preceded it. Rich historical and theological contributions and practices have aided in the preservation of God's creation. There is also a mounting body of evidence to the contrary, aided and abetted by capitalism and the perils of colonial domination, and economically driven development that post-modernism and neo-liberalism has dangerously and further advanced (Mendieta, in Batstone *et al.*, 1997), and the damage it has left behind.<sup>11</sup>

## 6. Sustaining consciousness for a future on Earth

The conceptual and hermeneutical tools of Liberation Theology and a broader eco-theology have been employed here through the solidarity of suffering on the cross of Jesus, and a humble earth that is daily crucified. The “proleptic forms of the postmodern” (Mendieta, in Batstone *et al* 1997, p. 260) world have indeed revealed themselves in the increasing fragmentation and disenfranchisement of marginalised people, and nature. There is a call for politics, theology and environmental sociology, and cultural studies to recognise all the world's people as human (Mendieta 16) and as their own cultural selves, and nature as its own generative self, towards a receptivity of what the Ecclesiology, “from below” (Karkkainen 2003: 180) offers us. The forgetting of our origins and degradation of our own lives, that is apparent in the Anthropocene era, doesn't change the fact that “God forgets nothing that he has created” (Moltmann 1994, p. 104).

Contoured by history and deep time inheritance evident in the ministry of Jesus, this paper has analysed current practices that degrade people, places, nature and things, and proffers that there is some small hope that, “By calling into question those systems and the religious, intellectual, and ideological structures that

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<sup>11</sup> All Abrahamic religions honour the earth and its providence (and paradoxically, all have fought religious wars). The focus of this paper has been Judaism and Christianity. Please visit the Qur'an, for equivalent discourse on human preservation of nature, for example: “And Allah has sent down rain from the sky and given life thereby to the earth after its lifelessness. Indeed, in that is a sign for a people who listen.” [Qur'an, 16:65](#)

validate them, we move closer to changing them” (Karkkainen 2003, p. 16). When we, the human governors of the planet become more cognizant of a g/local suffering that draws God “irrevocably near to this world, that he is a God, ‘with us’ and a God ‘for us’ ” (Sobrino 2008, p. 231), we are perhaps in with a chance. Moltmann suggests, “God’s preservation of the world doesn’t belong only to the realm of nature. It is already part of the realm of grace” (Moltmann 1994, p. 97). Can we then change our perspective as Paul did and embrace atonement and reparative revolution, and know grace? How does the planet in the grip and aftermath of COVID-19 in the twenty-first century, nourish grace and share it, and will we do it in time?

Sustainability and ecological consciousness have been issues for Christianity and the world long before the climate change crises of the Anthropocene. “Christology begins as receptivity to God’s self gift in Jesus Christ”, as Goizueta points out: “It all started with God” (2008, p. 91), and to continue that mission do we perhaps find ourselves at a time and place in which we “re-habilitate humility” (Foulcher 2015, p. 31) and find grace. Against the quietude of our recent earthly COVID-19 circumstances, perhaps Psalm 96 offers hope, and something of the future that is on offer if liberation of the earth and nature unfolds in equal measure to the liberation of human life:

Let the heavens rejoice,  
let the earth be glad  
let the sea resound and all that is in it.  
Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;  
Let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. (Psalm 96, 11-12)

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